

**STATEMENT OF THOMAS A. WEBER
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UNITED STATES DEPARTMENT OF AGRICULTURE
Before the
SENATE COMMITTEE ON AGRICULTURE, NUTRITION & FORESTRY**

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee. Thank you for the opportunity to appear today and provide an update on the Conservation Programs implemented by the USDA Natural Resources Conservation Service (NRCS).

Mr. Chairman, as you know, farmers across America are faced with ever increasing pressures to maintain a productive and profitable business. Prices for many farm commodities have been the lowest in years and poor weather and growing conditions have been issues in many areas. Production costs have increased due to many factors including rising prices of nitrogen fertilizer and natural gas. In addition to these concerns, farmers face increasing pressures associated with natural resources. In recent years, concern regarding the health of our soils, water supply, and air have made farming and ranching increasingly difficult.

We know that farmers want to be good stewards of the land. They know that stewardship is in the best interests of long-term productivity of farming operations. And by and large, it is also important to farmers and ranchers who want to leave improved natural resources and a better environment for future generations. Our mission is to help farmers and ranchers meet the challenge of sustaining their natural resources while maintaining a productive and profitable business.

Today, I would like to highlight the many ways our conservation programs are making a difference around the countryside. Since the enactment of the Federal Agriculture Improvement and Reform Act of 1996 (1996 Act), NRCS has experienced an increased national demand for participation in conservation programs. Farmers are utilizing these programs for a variety of benefits, including managing nutrients to save on input costs

and protect water quality, restoring and protecting wetlands to create wildlife habitat, installing grassed waterways to control erosion, and designing grazing systems to increase forage production and manage invasive species.

Land users are using conservation to improve the productivity and sustainability of their operation, while also improving the asset value of their farm even during times of such dire economic strain. Our programs are voluntary. In response to new environmental regulations at many levels, we are helping farmers and ranchers meet some of the regulatory pressures they may face. In turn, the public benefits from conservation programs go well beyond the edge of the farm field. Mr. Chairman, I believe that conservation programs the Congress included in the 1996 Act, when coupled with our historic conservation programs, and the state and local delivery system are proving winners for the farmer, and the country as a whole.

Conservation Technical Assistance

The cornerstone of our conservation activities is the NRCS workforce. Everything we accomplish is contingent upon the talents and technical skills of our field staff around the country. They are trained professionals with the technical tools, standards and specifications who get the job done. NRCS has operated since its creation through voluntary cooperative partnerships with individuals, state and local governments, and other Federal agencies and officials. That partnership may be even more important today if we are to meet the challenging conservation problems facing our Nation's farmers and ranchers.

While we are accomplishing much through the 1996 Act programs, it is important not to lose sight of the importance of our ongoing Conservation Technical Assistance program. For more than 60 years, the NRCS has used conservation technical assistance to build a foundation of trust with people who voluntarily conserve their natural resources. Each year, the NRCS provides information, education, planning, and/or application assistance to more than 1 million land users. On average, the Agency's conservation assistance

leverages more than \$1 in contributions for every Federal dollar invested. And through the National Cooperative Soil Survey, approximately, 22,000,000 acres have been mapped each year, so that natural resource decisions are based upon sound science and complete information about the natural resources.

NRCS accomplishes its goals by working with 3,000 local Conservation Districts that have been established by state law and with American Indian Tribes and Alaska Native Governments. We also leverage our resources with the help of more than 348 Resource Conservation and Development (RC&D) Councils. State and local governments contribute substantially, with both people and funding to complement NRCS technical and financial assistance. Approximately 7,750 full time equivalent staff years are provided annually by NRCS partners and volunteers.

Wetlands Reserve Program (WRP)

Next, I would like to highlight the accomplishments of the Wetlands Reserve Program. WRP preserves, protects, and restores valuable wetlands mainly on marginal agricultural lands where historic wetland functions and values have been either depleted or substantially diminished. Program delivery is designed to maximize wetland wildlife benefits, to provide for water quality and flood storage benefits, and to provide for general aesthetic and open space needs. Approximately 70 percent the WRP project sites are within areas that are frequently subjected to flooding, reducing the severity of future flood events. The WRP is also making a substantial contribution to the restoration of the nation's migratory bird habitats, especially for waterfowl.

As directed in the 1996 Act, the enrollment is separated into three components (permanent easements, 30-year easements, and cost-share agreements). Pursuant to appropriations act directives, enrollment is being balanced to respond to the level of landowner interest in each of these three components.

The 1996 Act authorized a total cumulative enrollment of 975,000 acres in the program. At the conclusion of FY 2000, the program had almost reached maximum enrollment. The Agriculture, Rural Development, Food and Drug Administration, and Related Agencies Appropriations Bill for FY 2001 provided an additional 100,000 acres, raising the cumulative enrollment cap to 1,075,000 acres and allowing 140,000 acres to enroll in FY 2001.

From inception of the program in 1992 through 2000, interest in WRP has been exceptional. Historically, there have been more than five times as many acres offered than the program could enroll. One benefit of WRP is the amount of resources we have been able to leverage with other federal programs as well as non-governmental organizations. It is clear from our experience to date, Mr. Chairman, that the WRP continues to be very popular with farmers and ranchers and is a program that clearly has strong support around the countryside.

Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program (WHIP)

The Wildlife Habitat Incentives Program provides up to 75% cost-share for implementing wildlife habitat practices to develop upland wildlife habitat, wetland wildlife habitat, threatened and endangered species habitat as well as aquatic habitat. The WHIP also helps landowners best meet their own needs while supporting wildlife habitat development, and to develop new partnerships with State wildlife agencies, nongovernmental agencies and others.

The program was initially funded at a total of \$50 million in the 1996 Act, to be spent over a number of years. As a result of strong need for the program, those funds were exhausted at the end of FY 1999, at which time 1.4 million acres were enrolled in 8600 long-term wildlife habitat development agreements. For FY 2001, the former Secretary decided to provide \$20 million for WHIP from funding in Section 211(b) of the Agricultural Risk Protection Act of 2000, as authorized in the FY 2001 Consolidated Appropriations Act. NRCS has made an enormous effort to develop partnerships and

outreach methods with government and private organizations to develop a program that targets specific state concerns.

Farmland Protection Program (FPP)

The FPP protects prime or unique farmland, lands of State or local importance, and other productive soils from conversion to nonagricultural uses. It provides matching funds to leverage funds from States, Tribes, or local government entities that have farmland protection programs. The FPP establishes partnerships with State, Tribes, and local government entities to acquire conservation easements or other interests in land. It ensures that valuable farmland is preserved for future generations and also helps maintain a healthy environment and sustainable rural economy. The program was initially funded in the 1996 Act at a level of \$35 million, to be spent over a number of years. To date, those funds have been exhausted, and local interest in the program continues to be strong. For FY 2001, the former Secretary utilized additional funding provided in the Agricultural Risk Protection Act of 2000 to fund the FPP at \$30 million. On January 22, 2001, a request for proposals was published in the Federal Register. Eligible entities have until March 8, 2001 to submit their proposals. After the evaluation process is concluded, successful applicants will be notified in June, 2001.

Forestry Incentives Program (FIP)

To increase timber production, FIP was authorized by Congress in 1978 to share the costs of tree planting, timber stand improvement, and other related practices on nonindustrialized private forest lands. The Federal share of these costs ranges up to 65 percent.

Mr. Chairman, the demand for sawtimber, plywood logs, and quality hardwood logs continues to be strong. To meet the demand for these products, more trees must be

planted and more forestland placed under good forest management. FIP is designed to share the expense with eligible, private landowners to produce timber. For the life of the practices, additional environmental benefits accrue including wildlife habitat and carbon sequestration.

Funding for FIP for FY 2001 is \$6,325,000. With these funds 4,049 participants were enrolled with forest management plans on 151,015 acres of private forestland. Of this total, 117,026 acres of trees were planted, 23,709 acres of timber stand improvements were accomplished, and 10,230 acres of site preparation for natural regeneration was implemented. We would estimate that since 1975, landowners have established nearly 4 million acres of tree planting and 1.5 million acres of timber stand improvement.

Environmental Quality Incentives Program (EQIP)

EQIP provides technical, financial, and educational assistance to farmers and ranchers who face serious threats to soil, water, and related natural resources on agricultural land and other land. The 1996 Act authorized \$200 million, annually for EQIP, utilizing funds of the Commodity Credit Corporation (CCC). For fiscal year 2001, the final appropriation was \$200 million. In previous fiscal years, Congress blocked \$26 million for savings, allowing only \$174 million to be spent annually. Consistent with the authorizing legislation, the program is primarily available in priority conservation areas in order to maximize the benefits of each Federal conservation dollar. The priority areas consist of watersheds, regions, or areas of special environmental sensitivity or having significant soil, water, or related natural resource concerns that have been recommended through a locally-led conservation process. For FY 2000, nearly 85 percent of the EQIP financial assistance funding was provided within priority areas.

The program has been extremely successful. We received nearly 76,168 applications in FY2000. After NRCS ranked the applications based on criteria developed at the local and state level, 16,443 long-term contracts with farmers and ranchers were approved. Since inception of the program, EQIP has averaged about 6 times the number

of applications than could be approved with available funding. Certainly the demand for the program remains high around the country.

Conclusion

Mr. Chairman, in closing, I would note that good conservation doesn't just happen. It takes all of us, including the Congress, the conservation partners, and most importantly, the people living on the land working together to make it happen. As exemplified through the many programs and activities we have underway, there is a great deal happening on the ground. And the work is not only helping farmers and ranchers build more productive and economically viable operations, but also is building a better natural resource base for the future. We are proud of our accomplishments and look forward to working with you to build on all that we have done thus far. This concludes my statement, Mr. Chairman, and thank you again for the opportunity to appear. I would be happy to answer any questions the Committee might have.